THE TERRIBLE MEEK

CHARLES RANN KENNEDY

Jon - This is
a book (Duh)
you might
enjoy — or at
least find
interesting —
or maybe not
— whatever
what the heck
Oh well . . . Rich

THE TERRIBLE MEEK

A ONE-ACT STAGE PLAY FOR THREE VOICES: TO BE PLAYED IN DARKNESS

BY

CHARLES RANN KENNEDY

AUTHOR OF

"THE SERVANT IN THE HOUSE"

"For they shall inherit the earth"

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TO

MY MOTHER

A NEWER COURAGE. MORE LIKE WOMAN'S. DEALING WITH LIFE, NOT DEATH. IT CHANGES EVERYTHING

PERSONS OF THE PLAY

A PEASANT WOMAN
AN ARMY CAPTAIN
A SOLDIER

THE TIME

A TIME OF DARKNESS

THE PLACE

A WIND-SWEPT HILL

THE TERRIBLE MEEK

THE TERRIBLE MEEK

Before the curtain rises, a bell from some distant place of worship tolls the hour. Nine brazen notes, far off, out of tune. Then a heavy peal of thunder, and the sharp, cracking strike of a bolt; yet, above all, one other sound, more piercing—a strange, unearthly Cry. There follows a mighty howling of wind, blended with a confused clamour of voices and the hurrying of many feet. The noises have almost all died away, when the Curtain rises upon inky darkness.

A sudden hush. The silence deepens. There is a sense of moorlands and desolate places.

Far off, a cow lows in her stall. Some lost sheep down in the valley bleats dismally. Silence again.

It is broken by the Voice of a Woman, weeping bitterly. A PEASANT WOMAN.

WOMAN. Oh! . . .

Another Voice: the gentlemanly, well-bred voice of an army man, now under some stress of emotion. A CAPTAIN.

CAPTAIN. My God, this is awful. I can't stand it.

WOMAN. Oh! . . .

CAPTAIN. Come, my good woman, it's all over now. There's no earthly help for it. You can't remain here, you know.

WOMAN. Leave me be. Leave me be.

CAPTAIN. All the others left long ago. They hurried off home the moment—the moment the storm came. . . .

Come, it's bleak and quite too dreadful for you up on this hill. Let me send you back to the town with one of the soldiers.

WOMAN. One of the—soldiers! . . .

CAPTAIN. Yes: come, come now . . .

WOMAN. Leave me be. Don't touch me. There's the smell of death on you.

CAPTAIN. Well, since you . . . And, after all . . .

The clank and rattle of his sword and uniform mark his moving away. He sits.

The smell of death. My God, it's true.

A bitter wind comes soughing up from the valley. The sheep bleats once, piteously. Then all is quiet again.

Some one else is coming. He is heard stumbling blindly up over the hill, the steel butt of his weapon ringing among the stones. A SOLDIER.
Groping in darkness, he collides suddenly with the CAPTAIN. *His Voice is that of a common man, city-bred;*

SOLDIER. Gawd blimey, wot the 'ell . . .
Oh, beg pawdon, sir. Didn't know it was you, Captain.

CAPTAIN. That's all right, sentry.

SOLDIER. 'Pon my word, sir, you give me a start, fust go orf. Wot with the storm an' the darkness, an' this 'ere little job we been doin', I tek my oath I thought for a moment as you was . . . well, summat else.

Wasn't quite a nice thing wot 'appened up 'ere just nah, sir, was it?

CAPTAIN. It wasn't.

SOLDIER. I'm on guard myself, sir; or I don't know as I'd 'a 'come up, not for choice.

You bin 'ere all the time, Captain?

CAPTAIN. Have I? Yes, I suppose I have. I've been here . . . ever since.

SOLDIER. It's not exackly the place ter spend a pleasant arternoon, is it, sir?

CAPTAIN. No, I suppose not.

SOLDIER. O' course, there's company, as you might say; but not quite congenial company, eh wot?

CAPTAIN. That depends entirely upon the point of view.

SOLDIER. Dam' creepy, I call it! . . .
Well, we done for *'im* good an' proper, any'ah.

CAPTAIN. My God, yes. We builders of empire know how to do our business.

SOLDIER. Pretty bloody business, too, ain't it, sir?

CAPTAIN. Yes, that's the word.

They consider it for a moment. Presently the SOLDIER *laughs at some amusing recollection;*

SOLDIER. It's an ill wind wot blows nobody any good. *I* got summat aht o' this, orl said an' done.

CAPTAIN. What's that?

SOLDIER. I got some of 'is togs.

CAPTAIN. His togs. How do you mean?

SOLDIER. Why, I'll tell yer. *'E* didn't want no more togs, not the way 'e was goin'; nah did 'e? So me an' the boys, we got our 'eds together, and arter we'd undressed 'im an' put 'im to bed, so to speak, we pitched an' tossed for the 'ole bag lot, one by one, till they was orl bloomin' well divided aht. I got 'is boots.

CAPTAIN. You got his boots, did you?

SOLDIER. Yes, pore devil. *'E* don't want them no more. Not quite my fit; but they'll do to tek 'ome for a keepsake—that is, if we ever do get 'ome aht of this 'ere stinkin' 'ole. My little missis 'll think a lot of them boots.

CAPTAIN. They will be a pleasant memento.

SOLDIER. Just wot *I* say, sir. Oh, my missis, she got an 'oly nose for 'orrors: she reely 'ave. Tellin' abaht them boots 'll last 'er a lifetime.

CAPTAIN. She must be an attractive young woman, your—missis.

SOLDIER. Oh no, sir, just ordinary, just ordinary. Suits *me*, orl right. . . .

Some memory holds him for a moment;

Funny thing, Captain, 'ow this 'ere foreign service keeps you—well, sort of thinkin', don't it? S'pose it's the lonely nights an' the long sentry duties an' such like. . . .

CAPTAIN. You've felt that too, then, have you?

SOLDIER. Yessir; meks me think abaht my missis. 'Er was in the family way when I left 'ome, sir—expectin' just a couple of month arter I sailed. . . .

The little beggar 'll be gettin' on by nah—that is, if 'e come orl right.

CAPTAIN. You've made up your mind for a boy then, eh?

SOLDIER. She allus 'oped for a boy, sir. Women's like that. S'pose it's orl right; it's men wot's wanted these days, wot with the Army an' the Spread of Empire an' orl that.

CAPTAIN. Yes, they make better killing.

The SOLDIER *is rather stupid, or he would have laughed. He goes on;*

SOLDIER. Yessir, 'er's bin 'ankerin' arter a kid ever since we was married six year ago; but some-'ow or other it never seemed to come orf. 'Ealthy woman, too, sir. *You* unnerstand 'ow these things is, Captain: there's no tellin'. Little beggars come by guess an' by Gawd, it seems to me. . . .

I wonder if it's a boy. There's no gettin' no news aht in this blarsted. . . .

Good Gawd, wot's that? . . . .

CAPTAIN. What?

SOLDIER. Be'ind us. Summat sort of . . . There, 'ark!

The WOMAN'S *Voice rises, sighing like wind;*

WOMAN. Oh! . . .

SOLDIER. My Gawd, wot is it?

CAPTAIN. It's a woman.

SOLDIER. A woman! Up *'ere?*

CAPTAIN. She has every right to be here. This is her place.

SOLDIER. But does she know? Does she know wot's . . . danglin' up yonder, over 'er 'ed?

CAPTAIN. She knows more than we do. She belongs to him. She is his mother.

SOLDIER. 'Is mother! . . .

CAPTAIN. Yes, he was her baby once.

The SOLDIER *is affected by this. He speaks with real compassion;*

SOLDIER. Pore devil!

Their minds go wandering through many troubled by-paths of thought. Presently the SOLDIER *speaks again;*

Wot was it 'e done, Captain?

CAPTAIN. Don't you know?

SOLDIER. Not exackly. I got enough to look arter with my drills an' vittles withaht messin' abaht with politics an' these 'ere funny foreign religions.

CAPTAIN. And yet you, if I mistake not, were one of the four men told off to do the job.

SOLDIER. Well, I 'ope I know my duty, sir. I on'y obeyed orders. Come to that, sir, arskin' your pawdon, it was you as give them orders. I s'pose *you* knew orl right wot it was 'e done?

CAPTAIN. No, I don't know exactly, either. I am only just beginning to find out. We both did our duty, as you call it, in blindness.

SOLDIER. That's strange langwidge to be comin' from *your* lips, Captain.

CAPTAIN. Strange thoughts have been coming to me during the last six hours.

SOLDIER. It's difficult to know wot's wot in these outlandish places. It's not like at 'ome, sir, where there's Law an' Order an' Patriotism an' Gawd's

Own True Religion. These blarsted 'eathens got no gratitude. 'Ere's the Empire sweatin' 'er guts aht, tryin' ter knock some sense inter their dam' silly 'eds; an' wot do you get aht of it, orl said an' done? Nuthin'! Nuthin' but a lot of ingratitude, 'ard words, insurrections, an' every nah an' then a bloody example like this 'ere to-day! Oh, these foreigners mek me sick, they do reely!

CAPTAIN. Yes, perhaps that has been the real mistake all along.

SOLDIER. Wot 'as, Captain?

CAPTAIN. Taking these people—men like this one, for instance—for foreigners.

SOLDIER. Well, you'll excuse me, sir, but wot the 'ell else are they?

CAPTAIN. I'm not quite sure; but supposing they were more nearly related? Supposing, after all, they happened to be made of the same flesh and blood as you and me? Supposing they were men? Supposing, even, they were — brothers?

SOLDIER. Brothers! Why, that's exackly wot 'e used ter say—'im up there. . . .
Did you ever 'ear 'im, sir?

CAPTAIN. Once. Did you?

SOLDIER. Once.

They remain silent for a little.

It was politics when I 'eard 'im. On'y it sahnded more like some rummy religion.

CAPTAIN. When I heard him it was religion—sounding curiously like politics.

SOLDIER. Them two things don't 'ardly seem to go together, do they, sir?

CAPTAIN. They don't. Perhaps they ought to.

SOLDIER. I don't know. Seems to 'ave led *'im* into a pretty mess. . . .
It's a queer world! . . .
I wonder wot it was 'e reely done.

CAPTAIN. It's rather late in the day for us to be considering that, seeing what *we* have done, isn't it?

SOLDIER. Well, I don't know. P'r'aps it's funny of me, but I never done a job like this yet withaht thinkin' abaht it arterwards. . . . An' I done a few of 'em, too.

If you arsk me, sir, it was them—well, them long-faced old jossers dahn there as begun the 'ole beastly business. You know 'oo I mean.

CAPTAIN. Yes, I know whom you mean. But haven't they a name?

SOLDIER. Well, I 'ardly know *wot* ter call them, sir. They're like a lot of old washerwomen. Allus jawin'. We got nuthin' exackly like that sort at 'ome, sir.

CAPTAIN. Oh, I don't know that there's all that difference.

SOLDIER. They was allus naggin' the pore fellow, one way an' another. Couldn't leave 'im alone. They started the 'ole business.

CAPTAIN. Why, what fault did they find with him? What was it they said he did?

SOLDIER. It wasn't nuthin' 'e done, far as I could mek aht. It was summat as 'e said, wot riled them.

CAPTAIN. Something he said?

SOLDIER. Yes, summat 'orrible; that's wot they said. Summat too bad ter be spoken, summat they wasn't a-goin' ter stand from anybody. Least, that's wot I 'eard. . . .

Wasn't so very 'orrible, neither. Not ter me. Sahnded a bit mad, that's orl.

CAPTAIN. Oh, then you know what it was?

SOLDIER. Yessir. They 'ad a name for it, too: on'y I can't quite remember. One of them big jaw-crackers, you unnerstand. Seems a bit orf for a bloke ter come ter this, just for usin' a few words.

CAPTAIN. There is great power in words. All the things that ever get done in the world, good or bad, are done by words.

SOLDIER. Well, there's summat in that, too.

On'y this thing 'e said—blimey, it was nuthin'! There ain't a loony alive wot doesn't say the same thing 'e said, an' more, a thahsand times a day, when 'e's reel bad in 'is 'ead. At the most, it sahnded like a bit of langwidge, that's orl.

CAPTAIN. And *you* don't mind that, do you?

SOLDIER. Me? 'E could 'a'done it till 'e was blue in the face an' welcome, far as I'd care.

CAPTAIN. You yourself, of course, had nothing at all against him? Nothing personal, nothing political, I mean. No more than I had.

SOLDIER. Lor' bless you, no, sir. Rawther liked 'im, the bit I saw of 'im.

CAPTAIN. Only they—the long-faced gentlemen—found him guilty. So, of course, they had to hand him over to the magistrate.

SOLDIER. Yes, blarst them. What did they want ter go an' do that for?

CAPTAIN. It was perhaps their—duty, don't you see?

SOLDIER (*taken aback on the sacred word*). Oh, was it? Well, since you put it in that way, o' course. . . .

CAPTAIN. Then, again, came the magistrate's duty. I suppose he found he had some duty in the matter? Did *he* very much object to this horrible thing that had been said?

SOLDIER. Not much! 'E ain't that sort, not this fellow! . . .

That's the funny thing abaht it. Far as I could 'ear, there weren't no mention of that, by the time the case come into 'is 'ands. No, it was riotin' an' stirrin' people up agen the government, as 'e on'y 'ad ter deal with.

CAPTAIN. Was that charge proved against the prisoner?

SOLDIER. They 'ad witnesses, I suppose. On'y you know wot witnesses are, in a case like this, sir. Got their orders, you unnerstand.

CAPTAIN. And, of course, they all did their duty. That sacred obligation was attended to. They obeyed.

SOLDIER. I don't know. Don't arsk me. I know nuthin' abaht it.

He is a little nettled at the turn the conversation is taking.

CAPTAIN. Was there no one, from among all those crowds that followed him, to stand up and say a word for him?

SOLDIER. Well, wot do *you* think? Them greasy blighters! You saw 'ow they be'aved just nah, when we done the job.

CAPTAIN. *Their* duty, as voicers of public opinion, I suppose.

SOLDIER (*sullenly*). I don't know.

CAPTAIN. Had they any very strong feelings against this monstrous thing he said? Were they so stirred with affection for the government? Or didn't their duty cover those unessential points?

SOLDIER. I don't know.

CAPTAIN. Well then, this magistrate? Having examined this poor wretch in the presence of all that exemplary, patriotic, obedient mob of people, he soon found out where *his* duty lay? It was his duty to hand him over to us—to you and me.

SOLDIER (*shortly*). Yessir.

CAPTAIN (*insisting*). To you and me.

SOLDIER. I said, Yessir.

CAPTAIN. Whereupon, though we were practically ignorant as to the charge upon which this man was convicted: though we had grave doubts as to whether he were guilty at all; and while it is perfectly certain that we had nothing against him personally, that we even liked him, sympathized with him, pitied him: it became *our* duty, our sworn, our sacred duty, to do to him—the terrible thing we did just now.

SOLDIER. I can't see wot you're drivin' at, sir. You wouldn't 'ave a man go agen 'is duty, would you?

CAPTAIN. I'm trying to make up my mind. I

don't know. I'm blind. I don't think I know what duty is.

SOLDIER. It's perfectly plain, sir. Arter all, duty *is* duty, ain't it?

CAPTAIN. Yes, it doesn't seem to be very much else.

SOLDIER. 'Ow do you mean, sir?

CAPTAIN. Well, for instance, it doesn't seem to be love or neighborliness or pity or understanding or anything that comes out hot and fierce from the heart of a man. Duty! Duty! We talk of duty! What sort of devil's duties are there in the world, do you think, when they lead blindly, wantonly, wickedly, to the murder of such a man as this!

SOLDIER. Well, far as I'm concerned, I on'y obeyed my orders.

CAPTAIN. Orders! Obeyed orders!

SOLDIER. Well, sir, it was you as give them to me.

CAPTAIN. Good God, man, why didn't you strike me in the blasphemous teeth, the hour I gave them?

SOLDIER. Me, sir? Strike my superior orficer!

CAPTAIN. You struck this defenceless man. You had no scruples about his superiority. You struck him to the death.

SOLDIER (*hotly*). I on'y did my duty!

CAPTAIN. We have murdered our brother. We have destroyed a woman's child.

SOLDIER. I on'y obeyed my orders. When my superior orficer says, *Kill a man*, why, I just kill 'im, that's orl. O' course I kill 'im. Wot's a soldier for? That's duty! (*With sudden lust.*) Blood an' 'ell! I'd kill 'im soon as look at 'im, yes, I would, if 'e was Gawd aht of 'Eaven, 'Imself! . . .

Not as I 'ave anythin' personal agen this pore devil. On'y I *do* know my duty.

They are silent for a little while. Then the SOLDIER, *feeling that he has gone too far, begins assuaging the situation;*

There's one thing certain: it's no use cryin' over spilt milk. 'E's dead an' done for nah, wotever comes. Dead as a door-nail, pore cuss.

The CAPTAIN, *who has risen during his excitement, now sits down again. His sword clatters against a boulder.*

A pause.

'E ain't the fust man I done for, neither; an' I bet 'e won't be the last. Not by a long way.

He speaks in an aggrieved tone. It is the way in which shame comes to a soldier.

A pause.

CAPTAIN (*deeply*). So you think he is dead, do you?

SOLDIER. Well, wot do *you* think? A man don't live forever, 'ung up as 'igh as we got 'im yonder. Besides, we did a bit of business with 'is vital parts, arter we'd got 'im up there.

CAPTAIN. And all that, you think, means—death.

SOLDIER. Well, don't it?

CAPTAIN. That's what I'm wondering.

SOLDIER. Six hours, mind you. It's a long time.

CAPTAIN. There is something mightier than time.

SOLDIER. Well, they don't supply little boys' playthings, not from our War Office. One of these 'ere beauties. . . .

He rattles his weapon in the darkness and continues;

. . . when they *do* start business, generally touch the spot.

CAPTAIN. It would have to reach very far, to touch—this man's life.

SOLDIER. Nah, wotever do you mean, Captain?

CAPTAIN. I mean that life is a terrible, a wonder-

ful thing. You can't kill it. All the soldiers in the world, with all their hate, can't kill it. It comes back, it can't die, it rises again.

SOLDIER. Good Gawd, Captain, don't you talk like that!

CAPTAIN. Why, what are you afraid of? We have shown great courage to-day, you and I. Soldiers should be brave, you know.

SOLDIER. That's orl very well, when it's a matter of plain flesh an' blood; but Lor'! Ghosts! . . .
Do you believe in them, sir?

CAPTAIN. What?

SOLDIER. Ghosts.

CAPTAIN. Yes. It came to me to-day.

SOLDIER (*slowly*). If I believed there was reely ghosts abaht. . . .

CAPTAIN. They are the only realities. Two of them ought to be especially important to you and me just now.

SOLDIER. Two? Blimey! 'Oose?

CAPTAIN. Why, yours, man, and mine. Our ghosts. Our immortal ghosts. This deed of ours to-day should make us think of them forever.

SOLDIER. Yours an' mine? I didn't know we 'ad ghosts, you an' me.

CAPTAIN. It makes a difference, doesn't it? There have been millions of our sort in the long history of the world. I wonder how many more millions there will be in the years to come. Blind, dutiful, bloody-handed: murderers, all of us. A soldier's ghost must be a pitiable thing to see.

The cloudy darkness slightly lifts from the ground. Their forms can be dimly discerned—vague shadows upon a deeper gloom. Up above there still dwells impenetrable night.

Tell me, brother murderer, have you ever prayed?

SOLDIER. Me, sir? . . . (*Ashamed.*) Well, sir, nah you arsk me, yes I 'ave—once.

CAPTAIN. When was that?

SOLDIER. Why, sir, abaht a couple of month arter I set sail for this blarsted little 'ole.

CAPTAIN. I understand. You prayed then for the birth of an innocent child?

SOLDIER. Yessir.

CAPTAIN. You will have need to pray again tonight. Both of us will have need. This time for the death of an innocent man.

The SOLDIER *is embarrassed. He does not know what to say. Something about "duty" comes into his head; but somehow it seems inappropriate. A brighter thought occurs to him;*

SOLDIER. Well, it's time I was dahn yonder, lookin' arter the boys. Any orders, sir?

CAPTAIN. Orders? No, no more—orders.

SOLDIER. Orl right, sir.

There is heard the rattle of his salute, and the dying away of his footsteps, as he stumbles blindly up and over the hill.

The CAPTAIN *does not speak until all is still again.*

CAPTAIN. My God! My God! Oh, my God!

He buries his face in the dirt and stones.

The faintest moaning of wind. The sheep bleats. A dog, disturbed by the sound, barks, far off. Then there is a deep silence, lasting one minute.

The Voice of the PEASANT WOMAN *is heard, speaking at first in dull, dead tones, very slowly;*

WOMAN. Thirty-three year ago he was my baby. I bore him. I warmed him: washed, dressed him: fended for him. I fed his little mouth with milk. Thirty-three year ago. And now he's dead.

Dead, that's what he is. Dead. Hung up in the air like a thief: broken and bleeding like a slaughtered beast. All the life gone out of him. And I'm his mother.

A gray, misty light creeps over her face and hands. Moment by moment, her features limn out faintly through the darkness, one pale agony.

Her garments still blend with the general gloom.

That's what they done to my son. Killed him like a beast. Respectable people, they was. Priests, judges, soldiers, gentlemen: even common folk like me. *They* done it. And now he's dead.

He didn't hold with their kind, my son. He was always telling them about it. He would stand up open in the market-place, at the street corners, even in the House of God itself, and tell them about it. That's why they killed him.

He had a strange way with him, my son: always had, from the day he first come. His eyes. . . . They was wonderful. They held folk. That and his tongue and his tender, pitiful heart.

They didn't understand it down here. None of us understood it. We was blind—even me. Many a time I got in his way and tried to hinder him: I was afraid for him, ashamed. And then he'd look at me. . . .

They was always wonderful, his eyes.

He wasn't particular, my son. He would go with anybody. He loved them so. There wasn't a drunken bibber in the place, not a lozel, not a thief, not a loose woman on the streets, but called him brother. He would eat with them, drink with them, go to their parties. He would go with grand folk, too: gentlemen. He wasn't particular: he would go with anybody.

And I tried to hinder him: I got in his way, because I was ashamed. I kept pushing in. I was afraid of what the people might think. Like I was blind. Like I didn't understand. I never told him as I understood. And now it's too late. He's dead.

A gust of anguish takes her, overwhelming her;

Oh, my son, my own son, child of my sorrow, my lad, come back to me! It's me, it's your mother, calling to you. Cannot you hear me out of the lone waste and the darkness yonder? My lad, come back, come back to me! . . .

He's gone. I shall never know the touch and the healing gladness of him again, my son, my little lad. . . . Hark! . . .

The wind rises and falls away like a whisper.

On'y the wind blowing up over the moors. God's breath, men call it. Ah! It strikes chill to the bones. . . .

Is it cold you are, my lad? I cannot reach you yonder—on'y your feet, your poor broken feet and the ankles hanging limp toward me. My bosom warms and waits for you, hungering, yearning like the day I bare you; but I cannot get up to you: I am cramped and cold and beaten: I cannot reach you yonder. . . .

There is heard a low fluttering as of wings;

The night-birds and the bats may come anigh you, they with their black wings; but not your mother, the mother that gave you life, the mother that held you warm, my son, my son, my little cold lad.

Her speech breaks away into sobs for a little while. As she recovers, she goes into a dazed dream of memories;

That was a cold night, too—the night you was born, way out in the country yonder, in the barn with them beasties. My man, he was sore about it. He covered us over with his great wool coat, and went and sat out in the yard—under the stars—till them three gentlemen come.

Them three gentlemen. . . . They talked wonderful. I have it all here in my heart.

Ay, it was rare and cold that night. Like now. Like it is now. . . .

Wonderful. They was not common folk. They was like lords, they spoke so fine. About my little lad. About you.

And then, that other night, before you come. It

was a kind of light: it was a kind of glory. Like sunshine. I remember every word he said. About you. About my little lad.

The agony begins to prick through again, stab by stab, as she continues;

It was all promise in them days, all promise and hope. Like you was to be somebody. Like you was to be a great man. I kept it inside of me: I fed on it: day by day as you sprung up, I learned you about it. You was to be no common man, you wasn't. You was to lord it over everybody. You was to be a master of men, you was. And now you'm dead.

Oh! . . . Oh! . . . Oh me! . . .

That day of the fairing, when we went up to the big city, your father and me and yourself. The wide asking eyes of you, your little hand, how it would go out so and so, your little tongue all a-clatter, the ways, the wonderings of you, and the heartbreak, the heartbreak when we had you lost. Talking to the good priests, you said. Good priests! My God! . . . .

It began that day, that bitter day of the fairing when we went up to the big city. I lost you then. I have lost you ever since.

Oh, the big city, the cruel city, the city of men's sin! Calling, calling the sweet life of a man and swallowing him up in death. There was no doing with you from that day. No home for you in the little village from that day. Your father's trade, your tasks, your companions, all fell off from you that day. The city, the big city called you, and the country thereabouts. It was your kingdom, you said. You must find out and build your kingdom. And the people thronged about you and followed you wherever you went in them days. They hung upon your words: they worshipped you. In them days. It was the way you had—your strange way. A power went out from you. You was always like nobody else. A king! A king! It was me as put it first into your head. You looked like a king. You spoke like a king. You ruled like a king. You, the little peasant lad I bore. I never told you: I never lifted up my hand to help you: I hindered you; but I was proud of you, my lad, proud and ashamed, and afraid, too! And now it's too late. You'm dead. All come to nothing. You'm dead. . . .

Dead. Killed by the soldiers and the judges of the great city. I'll tell them about it. I'll go through all the earth telling about it. Killed by the men you called your brothers. Killed by the children of your kingdom. Killed, and the golden crown of your glory torn off, battered, and cast to the ground. Beaten, mocked, murdered by the mighty masters of the world. Hung up, high up in the air like a thief. Broken and bleeding like a slaughtered beast.

She has come to the bottom of her grief. Her voice dies away through strangled sobs into silence.

A pause.

The CAPTAIN *rises. He halts irresolute for a moment. Then he can be heard moving over to where she lies prone on the ground.*

CAPTAIN. Woman, will you let me speak to you?

WOMAN. Who are you?

CAPTAIN. I am the captain who spoke to you just now. I am in charge here. I am the man who gave the order that killed your son.

WOMAN. Ah! . . .

CAPTAIN. Won't you hear me? I must speak to you.

WOMAN. What do you want to say? What is there for you to say?

CAPTAIN. It is about myself. . . . I. . . .

WOMAN. Go on. I'm listening.

CAPTAIN. I am a murderer. I want you to forgive me.

She does not answer.

I did it. I did it with a word. It was like magic. One word, one little word, and I was a murderer. There is nothing more terrible in the world than to be a murderer. . . .

And now I want you to forgive me.

She does not answer.

I suppose it's impossible. Forgiveness is impossible for a wretch like me. Because I killed him. For God's sake, speak to me!

WOMAN (*in a stupor*). I want to. I'm trying to. But you say you killed my son.

CAPTAIN. Oh! . . .

WOMAN. Why did you do it?

CAPTAIN. I did not know. Killing's my trade. It was the only thing they brought me up to do.

She does not answer.

I have been mixed up with it ever since I can remember. My father did it before me. All my people did it. It is considered the thing—the sort of thing a gentleman ought to do. They call it glory: they call it honor; courage; patriotism. Great kings hold their thrones by it. Great merchants get their beastly riches by it. Great empires are built that way.

WOMAN. By murder?

CAPTAIN. By murder. By the blood of just men. Women and little children too.

WOMAN. What makes them do it?

CAPTAIN. They want money. They want power. They want kingdom. They want to possess the earth.

WOMAN. And they have won. They have it.

CAPTAIN. Have they? Not while your son hangs there.

She is bewildered.

WOMAN. What do you mean? My son. . . . My son is dead.

CAPTAIN. Is he? Not while God is in Heaven.

WOMAN. I don't understand you. What were you saying yourself, just now? On'y a little while ago I heard his blood dripping down here in the

darkness. The stones are dank with it. Not an hour ago. He's dead.

CAPTAIN. He's alive.

WOMAN. Why do you mock me? You'm mad. Are you God, as you can kill and make alive, all in one breath?

CAPTAIN. He's alive. I can't kill him. All the empires can't kill him. How shall hate destroy the power that possesses and rules the earth?

WOMAN. The power that. . . . Who?

CAPTAIN. This broken thing up here. Your son.

WOMAN. My son, the power that. . . .

CAPTAIN. Listen. I will tell you. . . .

I am a soldier. I have been helping to build kingdoms for over twenty years. I have never known any other trade. Soldiery, bloodshed, murder: that's my business. My hands are crimson with it. That's what empire means.

In the city I come from, it is the chief concern of the people. Building kingdoms, rule, empire. They're proud of it. The little children in the schools are drilled in obedience to it: they are taught hymns in praise of it: they are brought up to reverence its symbols. When they wave its standard above them, they shout, they leap, they make wild and joyful noises; like animals, like wolves, like little brute beasts. Children! Young children! Their parents encourage them in it: it never occurs to them to feel ashamed: they would be treated like lepers if they felt ashamed. That's what empire does to human beings in the city I come from. It springs from fear—a peculiar kind of fear they call courage.

And so we go on building our kingdoms—the kingdoms of this world. We stretch out our hands, greedy, grasping, tyrannical, to possess the earth. Domination, power, glory, money, merchandise, luxury, these are the things we aim at; but what we really gain is pest and famine, grudge labour, the enslaved hate of men and women, ghosts, dead and death-breathing ghosts that haunt our lives forever. It can't last: it never has lasted, this building in blood and fear. Already our kingdoms begin to totter. Possess the earth! We have lost it. We

never did possess it. We have lost both earth and ourselves in trying to possess it; for the soul of the earth is man and the love of him, and we have made of both, a desolation.

I tell you, woman, this dead son of yours, disfigured, shamed, spat upon, has built a kingdom this day that can never die. The living glory of him rules it. The earth is *his* and he made it. He and his brothers have been moulding and making it through the long ages: they are the only ones who ever really did possess it: not the proud: not the idle, not the wealthy, not the vaunting empires of the world. Something has happened up here on this hill to-day to shake all our kingdoms of blood and fear to the dust. The earth is his, the earth is theirs, and they made it. The meek, the terrible meek, the fierce agonizing meek, are about to enter into their inheritance.

There is a deep, solemn silence for a moment or two, broken only by the tinkle of sheep-bells, which are gradually approaching.

WOMAN. Then it was not all wasted. It was the truth, that night. I have borne a Man.

CAPTAIN. A man and more than a man. A King.

WOMAN. My peasant lad, a king: Yes. And more yet. He was what he said he was. He was God's Son.

CAPTAIN. It will take a new kind of soldier to serve in his kingdom. A new kind of duty.

WOMAN. A newer courage. More like woman's. Dealing with life, not death.

CAPTAIN. It changes everything.

WOMAN. It puts them back again. What he done, puts all things back again, where they belong.

CAPTAIN. I can see the end of war in this: some day.

WOMAN. I can see the joy of women and little children: some day.

CAPTAIN. I can see cities and great spaces of land full of happiness.

WOMAN. I can see love shining in every face.

CAPTAIN. There shall be no more sin, no pain. . . .

WOMAN. No loss, no death. . . .

CAPTAIN. Only life, only God. . . .

WOMAN. And the kingdom of my Son. . . .

CAPTAIN. Some day.

WOMAN. When the world shall have learned.

CAPTAIN. Mother! . . . I am a murderer! . . .

WOMAN. I have been with Child. I forgive you.

It grows a little lighter.

Some one is heard stumbling blindly over the hill. It is the SOLDIER. *His form emerges gray out of the gloom.*

SOLDIER. 'Ello! Are you there, Captain?

CAPTAIN. Yes. I'm here.

SOLDIER. The fog's liftin' dahn below there—liftin' fast. It 'll soon be up orf this 'ill, thank Gawd!
The General wants ter see you, sir.

CAPTAIN. What does he want with me? Do you know?

SOLDIER. Another of these 'ere bleedin' jobs, I think, sir. Been a bit of a disturbance dahn in the tahn. The boys 'ave their orders, sir. General wants you ter take command.

CAPTAIN. Tell him I refuse to come.

SOLDIER. Beg pawdon, sir. . . .

CAPTAIN. I refuse to come. I disobey.

SOLDIER. I don't think I quite 'eard, sir.

CAPTAIN. I disobey. I have sworn duty to another General. I serve the Empire no longer.

SOLDIER. Beg pawdon, sir, it's not for the likes of me; but . . . Well, you know wot that means.

CAPTAIN. Perfectly. It means what you call death. Tell the General.

SOLDIER. Tell 'im as you refuse to obey orders, sir?

CAPTAIN. His: yes. (*Half to himself*); How simple it all is, after all.

SOLDIER (*after a moment*); I'm sorry, Captain.

CAPTAIN. Thank you, brother.

The SOLDIER *has no word to say.*

The darkness is rapidly melting away. All three figures are now beginning to be seen quite clearly.

SOLDIER. Look sir, wot did I tell yer? It's comin' light again.

CAPTAIN. Eternally.

An unearthly splendour fills the place. It is seen to be the top of a bleak stony hill with little grass to it.

The WOMAN *is dressed in Eastern garments; the* CAPTAIN *is a Roman centurion; the* SOLDIER, *a Roman legionary. Above them rise three gaunt crosses bearing three dead men gibbeted like thieves.*

At the foot of the crosses a flock of sheep nibble peacefully at the grass. The air is filled with the sound of their little bells.

CURTAIN

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